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Vintage Babes

Elizabeth Oldfield

CHAPTER ONE

'FITTER, THINNER, RICHER,' BRUCE proclaimed, topping up glasses in readiness for Big Ben booming out its televised chimes.

'Ditto,' a couple of the guests agreed.

'With knobs on,' added a third.

'I will remember to put out the wheelie bin every Friday morning.'

'My viewing of The Simpsons will be restricted to twice a week.'

I smiled. Was watching The Simpsons such a sin? I've stopped making resolutions. Year after year I had vowed to quit smoking and year after year I had failed, until finally I recognised the futility. And now I was departing one year content with my personal life and at peace, and entering the next in the same way. It had not always been so. Okay, there were a few minor gripes – like wishing I looked thirty-five, rather than fifty-five, could afford a home-help and was a millionairess to boot – but I had no nail-biting anxieties, no serious complaints.

'Whenever Joan farts in bed, I shall banish her to the spare room. Which means she'll spend most of her time there,' guffawed a man who had been tossing down brandies all evening, and received a murderous look from his wife.

As on previous occasions – some in the distant past, but mainly in more recent times – I was celebrating New Year's Eve at the home of my best friend, Jenny, and her husband, Bruce, in the company of mutual friends and several of their neighbours. Earlier twelve of us had sat down to a delicious four-course dinner with all the trimmings. Jenny is an heroic cook.

Jenny has also given up on new leaves because, time and again, she had resolved to lose weight and it hadn't happened. Like me with the cigs, come mid-January she

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invariably succumbs to the delights of Cadbury's flakes, chocolate digestives and their ilk. Though she isn't that fat, just 'cuddly', but it continually bothers her.

'Next year will see me – us – becoming richer,' Jenny declared brightly. 'Once I'm a working girl.'

Bruce laughed. 'Be realistic, my love. Whatever you might manage to earn will make zero difference to our lifestyle.'

Patronising twit, I thought. Although we go back decades, Bruce and I have never clicked. I've tried to like him, but he's not my sort – too much the in-charge husband and boring with it. Equally, I'm not his sort – overly independent, I guess.

'You'll change your tune once she's bringing in the cash,' I told him, but my words were lost beneath the first boing from the great clock tower.

Jenny hasn't worked – as in gone out to work and been paid – for twenty-eight years, since she became pregnant with William, her eldest, but after spending the autumn brushing up on her typing, attending computer workshops and practising on her daughter's p.c., as from 1st January – in eleven more boings – she will be actively job-hunting. I'm rooting for her, but Bruce is anti. He makes fun of her wanting to be, in his words, 'a dogsbody in an office'.

'With luck, I'll be richer, too,' I said to Jenny, who was stood beside me. 'Once Eric departs and I take over, which could be sooner rather than later.'

I am chief reporter at The Dursleigh Siren, the local weekly newspaper, while Eric is the editor. A lazy, uninspired, shambolic editor.

'Doesn't he have a couple more years to go until retirement?' she asked, as the boings progressed.

'In theory, but yesterday Mr Pinkney-Jones, the proprietor, came in and as he left I overheard him say something to Eric about 'time for a change at the top'.' I grinned. 'So –'

Boing. Boing. Final boing.

Glasses were raised. 'Happy New Year!' The shouts rang out. 'And many of them!'

Fireworks were exploding on the television screen when a tweed-jacketed arm slithered around my waist and I was turned to face a russet-haired man with jug ears and a toothy smile. My heart sank. It was Russell. I had been placed next to him at dinner.

The placement was strategic. As had been all previous placements beside lone males. Jenny harbours the eternal hope that I will hit it off with lone male, fall – whoosh! – head over heels in love, marry and live happily ever after. But Russell, a financial consultant and acquaintance of Bruce, had spent the entire meal detailing the

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intricacies of share options. Utter fascination for him; made me itch to thrust my celery sticks up his excitedly quivering nostrils before slumping into a deep, deep sleep. Ever since we'd risen from the table I had been socialising with other guests, all established two-by-twos, in a desperate attempt to avoid him, but at regular intervals he had appeared. And here he was again.

'Happy New Year, Carol,' he yodelled, and kissed me.

The kiss was pink-rubber-lipped and sloppy, like being snogged by a turbot.

'We must get together sometime,' he declared.

My smile fell into the rictus category. I had no serious complaints with my status quo? Wrong!

Later, when my middle-aged suitor and the other guests had departed, and I was ferrying dirty glasses through to the kitchen, I got Jenny on her own.

'There's a New Year's resolution I would like you to make,' I told her. 'I will not try to fix Carol up with any more unattached males.'

'You didn't care for Russell?'

''Fraid not.'

'He did seem a touch… intense.'

'He was. So no more fixing. Please, Jen. Pleeease. I do not want, do not need, have not the slightest inclination to be partnered off with anyone. Understand?'

She sighed. 'Alright. Unless,' she added, with a smile, 'he happens to look like George Clooney.'

'Not even if he is George Clooney!'

'You'd change your mind,' she said.

What I needed, I thought as I climbed into bed in the early hours, was a walker, a poodle faker, one of those debonair, anonymous types who do duty as escorts to film actresses and high society divas. A man I could trot out from time to time as my current interest – red-hot lover understood – but with no strings attached. Someone who'd be willing to accompany me to dinner parties, village am-dram productions, any 'twosome' events and who looked the part and would act the part, following my instructions to the letter.

'Flirt with me, gaze in adoration, converse brilliantly with all and sundry without revealing any personal detail, then lie low until I call you again.'

Not so much a wolf in sheep's clothing as a sheep in wolf's clothing.

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Be a divorced woman and it is automatically assumed, in toto, that you must be in want of a man. Even if you've been on your own for aeons, are happy with your single status and have reached an age which is politely termed 'mature'. You would think that after years of trying and failing to pair you off with Mr Wonderful, people would get the message that your independence is a choice and not a session in purgatory, or at least suffer battle fatigue. On the contrary. The longer you spend sans homme, the more doggedly determined they seem to become. And the less attractive are the Mr Wonderfuls. Or am I too picky?

'We thought we'd invite Jeremy,' – or Norman or Phil – friends, invariably female, say, dredging up a pot-bellied widower, twitchy bachelor, or divorced liver-spotted uncle as a potential beau.

'Found yourself a bloke yet?' the thrice-married Jezebel in the Post Office wants to know, with irritating regularity.

'Getting any nooky these days, princess?' the dustbin man enquires whenever our paths cross, and winks.

But an on-call escort would mean no more jug-eared bores, no more queries about my sad lack of a sex life, no more heavy hints from family, friends and shop assistants that it was high time I got cracking. An escort seemed the ideal solution and if he could fix a wonky loo and ferry a regular load of empties down to the bottle bank, so much the better. Trouble was, how to find one? If you're famous and beautiful or filthy rich and well-connected, and live in Hollywood or Monte Carlo, they're probably beating down your door. Otherwise – what's in it for him?

Hiring a guy from an agency had crossed my mind, briefly. But the prospect of forking out hard cash didn't appeal and when a trawl of the Net for 'male escorts' produced shots of butt-naked hunks sprawled over leopard skin sofas and adverts for 'the ultimate adult experience' – no thanks. It's not that I'm anti-sex – anything but – I just prefer it to evolve naturally.

I could, I suppose, buy a blow-up Bertie doll, sit him in my car beside me on dark nights, speed along the High Street and when people comment, act coy. People would comment. Work on a local paper in a smallish community and it's amazing how many folk know you, or know you by sight and notice you. And, as a reporter, I'm well aware of how rumours fly, can be exaggerated and embellished. How thistledown fiction hardens overnight into cast-iron fact.

'So you've shacked up with the landed gentry/millionaire banker/ageing pop star who lives in the area,' the Post Office Jezebel would say enviously. 'And he makes love non-stop/is buying you real diamonds/will be whisking you off in his Lear jet to his private Caribbean island next month.'

'Hear you're walking bandy-legged these days, princess,' the dustbin man would remark, and leer.

'Don't be so secretive, I'm dying to meet him,' Jenny would declare.

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But if a red light flashed at the pedestrian crossing, I was forced to halt and someone looked closer at my inflated passenger with his merry, fixed, half-moon smile…

Time for a rethink.

CHAPTER TWO

AS I HAD FEW grumbles with my personal circumstances, so my working life pleased me, too. I've always been passionate about journalism and while working on The Dursleigh Siren I had pinpointed plenty of local issues, aired subjects which had prompted readers' responses, interviewed all manner of interesting folk. Admittedly Eric's lackadaisical attitude riled me and, at times, had had me damn near headbanging in frustration, yet, on the plus side, it meant I had freedom. Freedom to make my own choices, freedom to follow my own instincts, freedom to develop a busy but satisfying routine.

Then Eric exited and Steve Lingard arrived.

Eyeing the guy one Tuesday morning in March, I did not feel kindly disposed towards him. Firstly, because he was sat in the editor's office at The Siren, behind the editor's desk in the editor's high-back chair – where I should have been sitting. Secondly, because he looked brisk, critical, impatient. A new broom set to sweep clean and make all the changes which I would have made. Third, because the binning of his predecessor's pub-counter sized ashtray indicated he did not smoke. I, of course, do. And as the general office is designated a 'no smoking' area, whenever I had come in to speak to Eric I had been able to wallow in nicotine heaven.

After his late December visit, the proprietor had kept clear of The Siren. I had decided I must have misinterpreted his reference to 'a change at the top' when, mid-February, Eric had dropped a hint that he could be leaving. As it had seemed correct to go through the motions, I had promptly applied for the editorship and, to my surprise and indignation, been refused. This was due to the fact that, unbeknownst to me, Eric's replacement had already been lined up, but also thanks to the proprietor's inherent belief that women are nature's also-rans. Fine in the kitchen, in the nursery, in a négligée. In charge? Forget it.

'You're a valued employee, Carol, and we've been so fortunate to have you,' Mr Pinkney-Jones had said, speaking in his plummy voice and smiling his latex smile. 'But the editor's position is really a man's position. You wouldn't want the rough and tumble. The responsibility.'

'Yes, I would,' I informed him. 'I do.'

I not only wanted the job, ravenously, I had expected it. Lying in bed at night, I had imagined myself rejigging the paper with expertise and to wide acclaim. Being interviewed on radio and television, in high demand as a journalistic guru. Becoming an icon. Okay, I'm pushing it, but given the chance I could have, would have, shone.

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It was not to be. Mr P-J had blithely ignored my insistence, my arguments, even my shameful attempt at a girly, wide-eyed plea, and brought in Steve Lingard.

I studied the man who had been transferred from The Ringley Bugle, another in the group of six local weekly papers which includes The Siren. During his tenure The Bugle's sales had increased by an astonishing thirty-five per cent, which was why the proprietor considered him to be a wunderkind – and expected him to work the same miracle again. Although Eric had spoken begrudgingly of Steve Lingard, who, he said, had been held up as a shining example, I had never met him. Mr P-J does not encourage rapport between his various staffs. Probably scared we might compare grievances, band together in a workers' army and revolt.

'He's tall, dark and handsome. A regular Captain Cool,' Eric had muttered, when I'd asked what Steve Lingard was like. But men have different ideas to women on what constitutes good looks – for example, Tom, my ex, used to rave about the 'delectable Cher' – and my description of the new editor was tall, dark and grim. Edging on the severe.

Did I want to work with him, for him, under him? No thanks. So should I ask for a transfer to another paper in the group? Mr P-J would agree. While he may not see me as an overlord, he recognised that I was a hardworking professional. I could also study the journalistic 'situations vacant' columns in general. Yet why should I put myself through all the turmoil of changing jobs? If anyone shovelled their belongings into a bin bag and pedalled off to the blue horizon, it ought to be Steve Lingard. Admitting defeat. Tail between legs. Soonest. Then I could do such a fantastic job of holding things together and creating my own initiatives that Mr P-J would be forced to abandon his sexist views. Or perhaps I should sue for discrimination?

'Residents' meeting to protest about mobile phone mast. Seven-thirty tonight in the village hall,' Steve Lingard said, in no-nonsense, whip-cracking mode. 'Tony, I need a full report on what happens, together with a photograph of the proposed site, quotes from the chief protestors and comment from the phone company. Around nine hundred words.'

'Nine hundred!' Tony looked shell-shocked.

He was not enamoured of our new boss, either. Tony, who usually covers sports, road accidents and court cases, which are considered a male domain, is a younger – thirty-nine to be exact – version of Eric, in that he bumbles along and doesn't overstretch himself. The change at the top threatened to ruin this. However, Melanie, the bosomy graduate who is the latest addition to our reporting team, replacing another easy-going Friar Tuck, had been making eyes at Steve Lingard since the moment he arrived. While she could be involved in a move to seduce and curry favour, she makes eyes at virtually any male who ventures within allurement distance – even if she is in her early twenties and, in this case, the male looked to be in his mid to late forties.

'Nine hundred,' Steve Lingard confirmed. 'Masts are the current hot issue and this could develop.'

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'I usually cover evening meetings,' I said.

'Carol covers any events at weekends and on Bank Holidays, too,' Tony told him, at speed.

'She's divorced and lives on her own, so she doesn't mind,' Melanie gratuitously explained.

Sharp grey eyes met mine. 'That true?'

'Yes, yes and yes,' I replied, wondering if the noble saddo should add that her carnal desires had gone unrequited for the past five years and she had a hole in the toe of her tights.

The golden boy had arrived on Monday, spent the day reading, scrutinising, investigating and, wasting no time, had summoned us three reporters to a 'planning meeting'. Eric, who had been shunted out and pensioned off – though he claimed to have opted for early retirement – had never aspired to planning meetings. A mistake maybe, for neither had he increased the circulation figures nor won a Scoop of the Year award. His good fortune had been in attending the same public school as Mr Pinkney-Jones, a connection which had allowed him to coast for years and push The Siren's expenses claims to the limit. Mr P-J, who had inherited the newspapers from an uncle, was none too bright, far too lax and not too interested. Though, so I've been told, he greatly welcomed the increased profits which Steve Lingard's success at The Bugle had generated. Instead of viewing the papers as a pesky albatross slung around his neck, Mr P-J had belatedly realised they could be a cash cow. And now came close to genuflecting whenever he saw his benefactor.

'So you wrote the previous pieces on protests about phone masts,' Steve Lingard said, sounding surprised, 'and objections to a skateboarding park and –'

'The uprising over advertisement hoardings beside the river. Plus reports of council meetings and Neighbourhood Watch and healthcare discussions,' I listed, with what was intended to be crisp authority. If he rated as Captain Cool, I could play Princess Pert. 'I did. And I'm happy to go along tonight.'

'Do that. But keep an eye out for anything… untoward.'

'You're referring to Councillor Vetch, who is pals with the phone company chairman and who could be in receipt of a backhander, arguing in favour of the mast?'

He cast me a quizzical look. 'You're aware of the situation?'

'I am, and I'll be on the alert. Ron Vetch might profess to be twenty-four carat dependable, but it's my suspicion he could've been on the take for years.'

What I didn't reveal was that the councillor was also pals with Eric, who had deleted comments in my earlier reports which had hinted at doubts about his friend's integrity. When I had objected, Eric had blathered on about the dangers of provoking

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a libel case and how he dared not risk the paper being dragged into court. I could have said he was talking piffle and that the intrepid hackette knew the score and wasn't so irresponsible, but we had had several battles on-going and I had felt disinclined to start another. Battling with Eric could be as frustrating as juggling soot.

'This afternoon Iced Kidneys are making a video at Pondsby Place,' Steve Lingard continued, naming a nearby National Trust property. 'Carol, would you attend and – '

'Who or what are Iced Kidneys?' I demanded.

I resented being allocated work. I had always run my own regime and did not appreciate being sent off to monitor some itsy-bitsy video shoot. He'd have me doing a survey of bus shelters next!

'They're an indie band influenced by 'crunk and B', and they've had two number ones in the charts this year already,' Melanie explained excitedly.

'Oh.'

I don't know what indie music is, let alone 'crunk and B'. Once upon a time when my daughter was a teenager and we watched Top of the Pops together, I could name all the groups in the charts, plus their lead singers. Nowadays – zilch. Don't recognise the personnel nor the terminology. Though I am word perfect with almost every line of almost every song recorded by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

'You must remember 'Clock My Bling Bling?' Melanie said. The rest of us looked blank. She sang a snatch of something which sounded like a dirge. An Albanian dirge. We still looked blank. 'But could I do that story? To see them in real life, to speak to the guys would be bulls-eye.' Reaching into the canvas tote bag which she lugs around, she produced a newspaper cutting and showed us a picture of shaggy-haired youths in jeans with the crotch at knee level and back-to-front baseball caps. 'They're awesome,' she sighed.

I've never trusted 'awesome' and, for me, anyone who wears the peak of their cap over the nape of their neck has to be pea-brained and looks pea-brained. Even if it is the uniform of the day. There's only one thing worse, people with clip-on plastic sunshades for their glasses, who walk around with them raised. Oh, and men with ponytails, especially if they're over forty. Though that's a common grouse. And I do make exceptions if the men are dramatically good-looking.

'Please could I go?' the girl begged, thrusting out her pink-clad twin peaks and giving Steve a cutesy smile. 'Please, please, please.'

'Okay,' he said curtly, 'but make sure you get the facts correct and give people their right names spelled properly.'

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She pulled at one of the long corkscrews of fair hair which dangle down over her eyes. 'I usually do.'

'Usually isn't good enough. You've had it far too easy here for far too long, but things are going to change.'

He may have been speaking to Melanie, but the warning went out, loud, clear and all encompassing. Smarten up, you lot, or else…

'At three p.m. today the Garth House Hotel is hosting a presentation to publicise the state-of-the-art health club and spa which they're opening to guests and exclusive membership,' Steve Lingard said, returning to his papers.

I arched a brow. 'Whoopy-do.'

'It may not be earth-shattering, but Garth House has advertised with The Siren for years so –'

'You know about that?' I said.

'I've done my homework – so a write-up would be politic. If you handle the health club –' he passed me a glossy brochure advertising it '– then Tony can spend time at the new traffic lights on the by-pass roundabout which are causing so many delays and which everyone's bellyaching about.'

Tony had been sucking on a Biro, but now he looked baffled. 'Doing what?' he asked.

'Photographing the queues and conducting a survey on how long drivers are having to wait, together with irate comments,' Steve replied. 'Don't bother to claim a lunch. As well as cutting down on errors, we're cutting back on costs and expenses.' Sitting upright in the high-back chair, he eyed the three of us. 'Do you have any thoughts on stories or features? Some suggestions to brighten up the paper?'

'Suggestions?' Tony repeated, as if he had not heard the word before.

'Eric never wanted suggestions,' Melanie objected.

Our new boss gave a dry smile. 'Think of me as a learning curve.'

Was he attempting to establish that we were as lacklustre as he believed? Or could he be trying to pick our brains? He may have done his homework – I'd been surprised he also considered Councillor Vetch to be an iffy character – but he hadn't worked on The Siren for years nor did he live in Dursleigh. So should I help… or let him stew?

'Think!' he urged.

'The local hospice is holding a fun run next month,' I said. 'And in June there's a festival of football for kids. We could do features on them.'

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As Mr P-J's darling Steve Lingard possessed the power to make life difficult for me, so it made sense to at least appear to be co-operative. Plus intelligent.

'The Siren hasn't done that before?'

'No.' I'd suggested both ideas to Eric the previous year, and the year before that, but, although agreeing, he had let them slide. 'We could publish photographs of the various teams. People get a buzz from seeing pictures of themselves, or their kids, in the paper. Or even from reading their names.'

He scribbled a note. 'Smart thinking.'

Was he being facetious, ironic or patronising? Or all three? Whichever, it wasn't smart thinking and he knew it. All I had done was read several editions of The Ringley Bugle and seen what he was up to. Like The Siren, The Bugle has a sizeable advertising section, plus a pull-out entertainment guide to what's going on locally which is syndicated, but the difference was in the news pages. The Bugle's twelve pages, as against our six, were sparkier and far more varied in content. While both papers have strong family values – no swear words, no nipple shots, nothing too graphically grisly – he had demonstrated those values by printing plenty of accounts and photographs of local events – the planting of a cherry tree in memory of a soldier who'd been killed in Iraq, children setting off on school trips, W.I. ladies with their flower arrangements.

'The chef at the local Italian won a best meal award recently,' Tony said. 'My wife and I go there sometimes in the evening,' he added, as if to emphasise that he did not dine courtesy of The Siren.

'So interview the guy, take his photo,' Steve told him. 'And while you're there, suggest that the restaurant advertises with us. The advertising needs to be boosted. But get out and about, make contacts, ask questions.'

'Charm old ladies,' I said.

Steve frowned. 'Sorry?'

'You wrote a tongue-in-the-cheek editor's column for The Bugle which had old ladies stopping you in the street to say how you'd made them laugh.' I, too, had done a little homework, in the form of a phone conversation with a Ringley reporter. A male reporter who had described Steve Lingard as 'a heavy-hitter, but a nice guy and a damn good editor.' I would've preferred to chat with a woman, who would have been more on my wavelength and more likely to pass on any gossip, but both of the women reporters had been out of the office. I had rung a couple more times, but frustratingly missed them again. 'Seems they fancied you rotten,' I said, wondering why such a grim-faced character should appeal.

'Yeah, I'm catnip to any female over seventy.'

'Which is why they tell you their family secrets.'

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This reference was to his Scoop of the Year Award, when the geriatric mother of a government minister had chattily revealed to him that, after an unwise evening in the company of lap dancers, her son had decided to resign.

'Are you going to write an editor's column in The Siren?' Melanie enquired.

He nodded. 'That's the intention. Once I've got the hang of things. Any other suggestions?'

Silence.

In a couple of weeks the am-dram society was putting on performances of The Master Builder and I could have suggested we printed a piece on that, but I kept quiet. Didn't want to make his life too easy. I had also amassed a folder of ideas for possible stories, but I wasn't about to share that with him, either.

'Nothing?' he asked.

Tony and Melanie looked thoughtful. 'No,' they said, in unison.

I shook my head.

Steve Lingard frowned and checked his watch. 'Then that's it for now. I've arranged to meet a few folk to introduce myself –'

'Who?' I demanded.

He was on my territory interfering and I wanted to know. I deserved to know. Indeed, it would've been courteous if he had raised the idea with me first.

'Today I'm seeing the fire chief and later one of The Siren's freelancers, the guy who writes about antiques. If that's agreeable to you?' he asked, with a sardonic bow of his head.

I made myself look coolly back. 'It is,' I replied. Let's face it, I didn't have any choice.

'Praise the Lord. But I'll be back in the office mid afternoon. And I can always be contacted on my mobile, I've given you the number. If anything comes in which you think merits The Siren's presence, clear it with me first.'

'Yes, sir,' I said, and resisted the urge to salute.

Eric had not demanded that he be consulted, he had allowed me, left me, trusted me to do my own thing.

As Steve Lingard departed, the rest of us returned to our desks in the general office. After agonising over how many drivers he would need to speak to in order to satisfy the new editor's idea of a survey – two, twelve, twenty? – Tony left for an early bar lunch to be bought at his own expense. He rarely missed lunch, washed down by a

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pint or two, which accounted for his jowls, beer barrel belly and tendency to nod off in the afternoons. Though it seemed unlikely he'd be doing much nodding off from now on.

Steve Lingard may not have said he considered us to be a dead loss trio, but it had been evident in his attitude. I was not a dead loss, I thought indignantly. I had been responsible for the major proportion of the news which filled the news pages. But did he know that? He had been surprised to realise I had written about the phone masts et al, so could Eric have claimed the reports as his? It was possible, correction highly probable; given Eric's erratic commitment to the gospel truth and the fact that he had rarely put my by-line on my work. Reckoned it would've looked like I wrote too much. Which, of course, I did. The ultimate underachiever and devious with it, Eric had shown little enterprise. He had preferred to let others – i.e. me – provide the drive, while he subbed their work in the comfort of his office. And studied the racing journals, placed telephone bets and chain-smoked.

'OHOC. OHOT. WLTM a WOCA with GSOH. That'd suit you.'

I looked across at Melanie. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Own house, own car. Own hair, own teeth,' she translated. 'Would like to meet a woman of a certain age with good sense of humour for a long term relationship. Interested?'

'No thanks. And you shouldn't be logging onto encounter sites and printing out details in company time and at company expense. Eric may have let you get away with murder, but Mr Lingard would not approve.'

'He isn't here.'

'Makes no difference.'

If she had a spare moment and, I suspected, whenever she was left in the office alone, Melanie scanned what seemed to be a never-ending scroll of lonely hearts 'males eager to contact females'. When I had asked why a girl in her twenties should need to forage for dates in such a way, I had been informed that 'everyone does it'. I'd also been informed that there are specialist sites catering for vegans, poets and herpes carriers. Wow!

Courtesy of the Net, Melanie had even gone speed-dating where, in the course of one evening and after sipping a free cocktail, the organisers had introduced her to eighteen members of the opposite sex and allotted her three minutes to talk to each. So much for romance! Whatever happened to old-fashioned courting?

Melanie had subsequently met up with two of the men and afterwards given me a detailed – too detailed – account of what had happened. While not wanting to go all the way on a first date and be viewed as 'easy', she had agreed to blow jobs. Crikey! In my youth, a lad would've considered himself fortunate if a girl had held his hand.

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Melananie had not, however, felt inclined to see either of the guys again. And vice versa.

'I am a well-mannered, healthy and intelligent businessman, looking for an older solvent lady who –'

'No!'

Melanie popped a Smint in her mouth. She sucks them continuously. 'Wouldn't you like to team up with a guy? There's a lot on offer for the silver surfer market.'

I stiffened. 'I am not a silver surfer.'

'You are nearly.'

I disagreed. To my reckoning, you don't rate as a silver surfer until you clock at least sixty, and more like sixty-five. I was a long way off that. A mere chick. A funky chick, too. But I wasn't prepared to argue the point. Not with someone who regards thirty as 'past it'.

'What I wouldn't like,' I said, 'is to fix to meet a guy over the Net and find myself lumbered with a well-mannered, healthy and intelligent serial killer. Or rapist.'

Melanie rolled her eyes skywards. 'That is so last millennium. On-line dating is just window shopping. You chat for two or three weeks, then arrange a get-together in a public place. If you're sensible, it's perfectly safe. How about this one? JLFAS. Just looking for adulterous sex.'

I shuddered. I'm not saying my moral compass is superior to anyone else's, but I would never sleep with a married man.

'Spare me.'

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